

Asha for Education

By SMITA JAIN

Every Wednesday, Monica Jain and a few of her friends gather for a discussion session. For a few minutes, their talk revolves around social and family events, their 50-hour workweeks, their career plans. Then they move to the subject of their meeting: what they can do to improve educational access for India's underprivileged children. "I think we should organize a community cultural festival as a fundraiser," one says. Another brings up an education project in Bihar that needs aid. They discuss project proposals they have received from Indian NGOs, and create a plan of action.

While the conversation is commendable in itself, what makes it remarkable is the fact that Jain and her fellow Philadelphians do not live anywhere near India, many are not Indian and most have rarely, if ever, visited India. Most are neither well-settled professionals nor employees of an NGO. They are primarily university students attending academically rigorous American universities.

Yet despite their demanding schedules, what brings them together is the desire to make a difference in the lives of underprivileged children through Asha for Education, an international collective of individual chapters dedicated to "catalyzing socio-economic change in India through education of underprivileged children" as its Web site states (www.ashanet.org). With 74 chapters spread across the United States, Canada, Europe, Australia, India and Singapore, and disbursement of more than

\$6 million from 1995 to 2004, Asha's global army of more than 1,000 active volunteers is crossing geographical and socio-cultural barriers to make a significant difference in the lives of millions of Indian children.

The success of this non-hierarchical, decentralized, volunteer-run and zero-overhead charity has not gone unnoticed. In 2004, Charity Navigator, an independent charity evaluator with a database of more than 3,000 organizations, ranked Asha for Education as the top charity operating on less than \$2 million a year in the field of international relief and development.

For volunteers like Ravi Kondikonda, a memory chip designer in Allen, Texas, stumbling across Asha for the first time was almost like a dream come true. "A few months into my masters (degree program) at Louisiana State University, I realized a great difference between India and the U.S. in terms of having an opportunity to have basic education. I felt like doing something about it and when I saw the Asha Web site, I realized that this organization is exactly what I was looking for to act on my ideas."



The international collective's efforts to increase educational access spells hope for underprivileged children in India.

Kondikonda is now the Asha Dallas chapter coordinator, spending more than 12 hours a week on Asha-related volunteer activities. Last year, the chapter raised more than \$3,000 through a concert featuring the Indian contemporary fusion music band Indian Ocean. "It gives me immense satisfaction that through the organization I am able to make a difference in the life of at least one child who otherwise would not have been able to go to school," he says.

Like Kondikonda, many volunteers of Asha's American chapters get involved while in university. In fact, more than half of the chapters are student-run. Jain, a senior at the University of Pennsylvania and the awareness coordinator for Asha Philadelphia, says, "Being on a college campus where people spend a lot of money on parties and alcohol, I think initiatives like Asha are a good way to channel some of this money for good use. Also, because of the non-hierarchical nature of the organization, we are able to choose projects that we would like to fund and contact them directly about any questions that we have," she says.

Indeed, the absence of organizational red tape coupled with Asha's non-hierarchical structure has enabled a diversity of project types and an extensive geographical outreach within India. There are 385 projects spread across 24 states. Some recently funded projects highlight this diversity: In Jharkhand, Asha Stanford in California has funded a science laboratory for Jagriti Vidyalaya, an NGO dedicated to rural reconstruction; in Madhya Pradesh, Asha Seattle in Washington has funded research on child disabilities in partnership with Sambhavna Clinic, which provides medical support to survivors of the Bhopal gas tragedy.

Seed funding from Asha has often proven critical for the

Students at Akshardeep, an alternative school program for children of sex workers and migrant labor, in Maharashtra. The project is funded by Asha Zurich and initiated by the NGO Swadhar.



Photographs by ANDRÉ URECH and ELIA MARINUCCI



Courtesy Asha for Education

Girls learn stitching as part of their vocational training under the Asha-funded project run by the Timbaktu Collective in Andhra Pradesh.

success of unique educational programs that may have been overlooked by mainstream funding agencies. “For our Government School Adoption Program, funding from Asha helped in providing additional teachers to the schools, which was a critical need. Though the schools had an enrollment of 250 students, they only had four teachers appointed by the government,” said Ram Krishnamurthy, coordinator of the program to strengthen government schools in Karnataka.

The ease of joining Asha is part of its appeal. Volunteers can join a chapter close to them, or if none exists, they can start one after a period of affiliation with an established chapter. The prerequisite for being a volunteer is a desire to do something for underprivileged children in India by raising funds for NGOs that are working to improve their plight. A chapter is free to decide what projects to fund, as long as the programs are secular and have an education component. The volunteers in each chapter democratically select a proposal to support in each funding cycle, and these must be reviewed through the main Asha data base—monitored by volunteers—before funds can be disbursed.

Volunteers in Asha’s chapters outside India recognize the limitations of monitoring projects from thousands of miles away. That’s where Asha’s large Indian volunteer base proves helpful. “Asha chapters in different parts of the world often contact our volunteers for information on projects in our vicinity. We also help them conduct site visits, monitor projects and file site reports,” says Sharad Jaiswal, chapter coordinator of Asha Bangalore.

“What attracts me to Asha is that, due to its decentralized structure, there is 100 percent transparency of funding, 100 percent efficiency as all the money is spent in India, and total oversight over projects because of the mandatory auditing requirements,” says James Minter, fundraising coordinator for the Asha chapter in Washington, D.C.

Though raising funds for education-related projects in India is central to Asha’s work, volunteers see raising awareness within their own countries as an equally important focus. “Asha has been a useful avenue for me to act on my interest in helping underprivileged children in India. In addition, it has greatly increased my own awareness about social issues in developing countries like India,” says Minter, who spends four months each year conducting site visits for projects funded by his and other Asha chapters. On his most recent trip he learned about the socio-economic conditions of people living in Uttaranchal, Bihar, Jharkhand and West Bengal. He’s excited about his chapter’s upcoming awareness and fundraising events: an Indian documentary film festival, a marathon and a concert.

“I had to risk losing my job to volunteer, and my family is against the unpaid work and use of personal resources,” he says. “The most rewarding part of my work has been visiting project sites and seeing the faces of children light up. Volunteering doesn’t seem like work to me, but is something that springs out of my soul.”



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